

Classic Poetry Series

Peter Bakowski
- poems -

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Peter Bakowski(15 October 1954 -)

Peter Bakowski is an Australian poet. His poems often use deceptively simple words and images, reminiscent at times of words in a child's picture book, but with some stylistic similarities to the work of writers such as [Charles Simic](http://www.poemhunter.com/charles-simic/) or Vítězslav Nezval.

Biography

Born in Melbourne, to Polish-German immigrants. Bakowski was born premature, with a hole in the heart, he has survived two heart operations. His parents ran a delicatessen, and after completing his secondary schooling he worked in a series of low-paying jobs before opening his own record shop in the early 1980s.

He commenced writing poetry while travelling through Texas in 1983. His early works, including his first book *Thunder Road, Thunder Heart* (1988), show the influence of American Beat writers such as [Jack Kerouac](http://www.poemhunter.com/jack-kerouac/), [Allen Ginsberg](http://www.poemhunter.com/allen-ginsberg/) and [Charles Bukowski](http://www.poemhunter.com/charles-bukowski). His poems have appeared in over one hundred literary magazines worldwide, predominantly in English but also in Arabic, German, Japanese, Polish, Spanish and French. He has lived in Melbourne and London, and travelled widely throughout Australia, Europe, North America and Africa, occasionally as an artist-in-residence. In 2007 he became an artist in residence at the University of Macau. He has been writer-in-residence at the B.R. Whiting Library in Rome; the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris; the University of Macau; Soochow University, Jiangsu Province, China; the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Greenmount, Western Australia; the Hobart Writer's Cottage in Battery Point, Tasmania; the Arthur Boyd Estate of "Bundanon" near Nowra, New South Wales; the Broken Hill Poetry Festival, New South Wales.

His travels have provided a wide range of material for his work; his fifth collection *Days That We Couldn't Rehearse* contains poems set in Paris, Transylvania, the Upper Volga, Uzbekistan and Sarajevo.

Raised a Catholic, in 1994 he married Helen Bourke, an Irish-Australian seamstress. They live in Melbourne with their son Walter.

His book *In The Human Night* won the 1996 Victorian Premier's Award, the C. J.

Dennis Prize for Poetry. In 2010 he was shortlisted for the same award, for his book *Beneath Our Armour*.

A Cup Of Water, Suzhou, October 1945

The cup of water
accepts
rain
the wind
a leaf leaving its mother.

It has heard
husbands and generals give orders,
grandparents talk of gods and ancestors,
children conversing with a friend or sorcerer
whom no adult can see.

Set
on bench or table
it hears
the swish of a broom,
a cat scratching at a closed door,

the clock complaining
that it's only a clock,
a button torn from a lover's robe
roll across a bedroom floor.

The cup of water is
raised to the lips of
a monk,
a fisherman,
a fortune teller,
an orphan.

The cup of water waits
to be refilled,
to be of use
or forgotten.

It waits for footsteps,
the nearness of a hand.

A Writing Tip Of Mine

When placing words

your way,

don't leave any

in the way.

Peter Bakowski

At Brunswick Heads, New South Wales, September 2006

The river is brown-hued, wide.

In its shallows small black fish appear,

hyphens of life,

pleasing barefoot children.

The river is pelican-ushered to the sea.

The beach curves south to a crop of hills

where a white lighthouse stands,

its spiralling stairs now climbed

by camera-burdened tourists.

In the sky, there's a small plane, silver-bellied,

gone when you turned

to a Ruth Rendell paperback.

This coastline asks you to name yourself,

fisherman, beachcomber, surfer, retiree,

to examine whether you're more than that.

A gull,
eases from rock to sky,
becomes a speck and miracle
to a small boy, a sandcastle lord,
standing sandy-kneed, squinting.

The wind, the waves, play their games of give and take,
the horizon searches its deep pockets
for the makings of tomorrow's weather.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

Peter Bakowski

Away From Such Vanity

When a man grows a moustache,
his eyebrows want to hide in his ears.

Peter Bakowski

Choose Your Moment

Before you lecture a thirsty person,

give them water.

Peter Bakowski

Consider This

You can rest

in the shade of a tree,

but not

in the shade of an axe.

Peter Bakowski

Don'T Join The Inflexible

If you're rigid in your thinking,
you're not really thinking.

Peter Bakowski

Inertia

When all the things you need to do
remain
all the things you need to do.

Peter Bakowski

Instructions To Horsemen, Krakow, Poland, 1241

Your journey will be long,

dangers certain.

From clouds snakes will fall.

These can be killed only

by those amongst you

who have eaten wolf.

Don't drink from pond or stream

in which black reeds grow.

One mouthful will turn you to stone.

Sleep with an eagle feather

clasped in your fist.

This keeps away lightning.

Find my son,

carried off by Tartars.

He has a crescent-shaped scar

on his left cheek.

By this you will know him.

One hundred fine horses

for his safe return.

I'm too old to ride with you.

Be my eyes,

vigilant in every village and forest.

Put an end to my nightmares

in which two Tartars

whip my blindfolded son

towards the edge of a cliff.

(from *Beneath Our Armour*)

Peter Bakowski

Jose Anok, Former Prisoner Of War, Hong Kong

Two Japanese soldiers tied me to the lamppost with rope.

Their commanding officer had a small mole on his right cheek.

He showed me the knife.

When he began I fainted.

Thirst. Dizziness. Buzzing flies.

My hand moved up to my right ear.

A hole. Congealed blood. I fainted again.

In the prison camp I begged a fellow prisoner to slash my throat.

“Not for a double ration of rice,” he said.

His name was Wang,

He and I became master rat-catchers,

cooked them on the blade of a shovel,

sucked each bone clean.

When the Japanese surrendered,

Wang returned to the mainland,

I remained in Hong Kong,

laboured unloading cargo

down on the waterfront.

Bought a gun off a seaman.

Many times I've stood in front of the hotel mirror,
the muzzle of the gun in my mouth.

Opium allows me
to briefly float free of my ribs.

I've written to my father,
told him I've met a kind woman,
been promoted to foreman.

The crafting of these lies
finds me opening the hotel drawer,
lifting out the gun again.

Last week,
I threw a brick through the window
of another Japanese restaurant.

I wait for the knock on the door.

I imagine the one handcuffing me,
a rookie,
the war, pages in a history book
he studied at high school.

In the cell,
I'll look at
the walls,
the initials and dates
scratched there.

(from *Beneath Our Armour*)

Peter Bakowski

Macau, City Of Exiles

Wen stares into the bathroom mirror,
touches lightly his graying hair,

the black eye patch that covers the hollow
made by a Japanese sniper's bullet
in the Manchurian winter of 1939.

Blood-stained tufts of grass.

Strong hands lifting him from the mud,
being strapped to the back of a horse,
how swiftly the ground moved beneath them.

The inside of a tent.

A face, a doctor in a bloody gown,
who apologized for the field hospital's
lack of morphine.

The doctor looked down at the dirt floor,
then at Wen,
"As well as your right eye,
you lost a finger to frostbite."

After the war

Wen worked his way south.

Cut hair near the railway station in Tianjin,

repaired bicycles in Wuhan,

sold medicinal herbs in Guangzhou,

paid to have himself smuggled into Macau

on a fishing boat.

Wen sometimes plays cards with his widow neighbour,

Mrs Cheng.

They talk about

the best place in Macau to sample eel,

their favourite Fado singers,

how strong and sweet they like their coffee.

They talk

of the past -

working in the fields alongside a parent or ox,

the first time either of them saw an aeroplane,

the proverbs a grandfather repeated.

Mrs Cheng and Wen

talk about

the Shanghai actress, Lotus Chang,

who owed five hundred masks,

her sailor lover who threw himself into the mouth

of a Javanese volcano.

The afternoon brings a cooling breeze.

Mrs Cheng offers Wen a second piece of Madeira cake.

He pats his stomach in protest, then accepts.

Both are quiet for a while,

each thinking of which card to play next.

(from *Beneath Our Armour*)

Peter Bakowski

Men

Some worry about going bald,
others go bald from worrying.

Peter Bakowski

Missing In Action

Although she's mopping the kitchen floor,
Ella is crying.

Words come out of her husband's mouth.
Some variation of "Stop now, Ella."
Ed's a good man,
keeps his lawn trimmed,
stays away from liquor and the racetrack.

Neighbours bring meals.
Roast chicken, gumbo, lasagna.
Ella remembers her father saying,
"Food is love, the only way some folks can speak."

Roland's room.
Ella stands at its threshold,
looks again at the wall poster of Sly Stone
wearing a rainbow-coloured cap,
on stage at Woodstock,
once a hit-maker,
once a hero.

Evenings, after dinner,
sometimes Ed moves towards the record player,
then shakes his head,
knows Ella isn't ready,
tells himself
that the quiet,
after an eight hour shift at the brewery,
is good.

Ella removes the candlestick holder
from the dining-room table,
to work further on her quilt,
the story of her sharecropper parents
told in panels,
told in thread and stitches,
their days of work and prayer
sewn into a field of cloth.

In the quilt
trees appear.
Trees in which
a girl could hide,
pretend she was a bird,
flying away from her home
of plank and tin,
flying away from the South,
following the moon-lit railway tracks
all the way to Chicago.

From his armchair,
Ed looks up from the book he's reading.
He cannot see words
only Roland,
lying in mud,
flies crawling his face.

Ed closes his eyes
until the image leaves him.

There is Ella,
still at the dining-room table,
working on her quilt.

Ed watches the threaded needle
dive and resurface,
guided by his wife's steady hand.

Peter Bakowski

My Zen Answer

You get a grip
when you
let go.

Peter Bakowski

Nature Does What Nature Does

Either tortoises live long lives because they don't hurry
or they don't hurry because they live long lives.

Peter Bakowski

Portrait Of Blood

The thin armour

you give the newborn,

the midwife

washes away.

In playgrounds,

when the bullied fall,

you rush

to the hill of a bruise.

The shape of your engine room,

lovers carve into tree trunks.

In war

you blossom from

every wounded soldier and civilian.

In the field hospital

you glisten on

the gloved hands of surgeons

and each busy scalpel.

You're not to be trusted,
rummaging in the attic of our skulls,
studying the blueprints of our veins,
deciding where to place
your quick assassins,
clot and haemorrhage.

I hold my breath,
check my pulse,
as you make your rounds.

(from *Beneath Our Armour*)

Peter Bakowski

Portrait Of Diego Rivera, December 1955

I will paint

my eroded mother,

surrounded by tiny coffins,

trying to climb a ladder to heaven,

her feet

made of wet sand.

I will paint

my earnest father,

trying to juggle sacks of money and his heart,

his hands on fire.

I will paint

the two lovers,

the selves they cannot learn or flee,

the time between kisses growing longer,

the time between lies growing shorter.

I will paint

the sky raining blood,

villagers anxious beneath it,
some wiping the blood
from their children's foreheads
with shreds of the Mexican flag,
others trying to catch every dropp in soup bowls.

I will paint
what Spain, Paris, Detroit,
California, New York City, Mexico,
each sampled woman, grain and fruit,
have meant to me,
king of gluttony, seated at table,
reaching for knife and fork
as a skeleton waiter whisks away
my unfinished heart.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

Peter Bakowski

Portrait Of Verna Yan, Crime Fiction Writer

Ten pages a day in longhand,

Verna's new novel is going well.

Verna sits on a park bench overlooking the Pearl River.

There beneath its surface—

fish, eels, crabs,

perhaps the revolver she dropped into it

two decades ago.

She watches—

a stray dog leave the shade of a tattered palm

to paw at a watermelon rind,

a couple dancing on an apartment terrace.

The tango music is loud,

the woman bends to the man's lead,

his lips move closer to the lobe of her right ear.

They are kissing, not dancing.

The man is shirtless now.

Both fall to their knees,

roll away from view.

Verna returns

to her apartment,

to re-reading *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

by Raymond Carver,

stories about feelings expressed haltingly, violently or too late.

Verna looks at herself in the mirror, sees again—

that upper tooth chipped when she fell down the apartment stairs

on another blurred morning dedicated to drinking gin,

a woman who shot her cheating husband

in a Coloane apartment twenty years ago.

Two bullets in his lying face—

a mess for the maid to find

when she came for more than the cleaning

each Wednesday.

Verna

moves towards her bedroom,

gets into bed,
thinking about the new character
who will appear in the next chapter.

She's decided his name
and whom he'll kill first.

(from *Beneath Our Armour*)

Peter Bakowski

Regarding Telepathy

I'm in more than two minds about it.

Peter Bakowski

Remote

When you channel surf

take care that your mind

doesn't drown.

Peter Bakowski

Someone Will Have To Go

Portrait of Leonard Drysdale, clerk, Birmingham, England, 1946

Ever punctual I stride,
past doors of frosted glass and stencilled names,
the expected sounds of typing.
A morning nod to Mrs Flegg in reception,
then along to my office,
closing its door to sigh at the overflowing in-tray.

Some use of dictaphone and telephone,
issuing curt instructions
while examining the state of my fingernails.
Straighten my tie, trot down the corridor
to pretend excitement or dismay over the latest regional sales report
in the office of pencil-tapping Mr Codling
who dispenses, as always,
a terse 'Could be better.'

Sandwiches for lunch and a three-sugared cup of tea,
set down by Mrs Wilkins,
a limp in her left leg, but quite a dancer before the war.
Four trophies on her mantelpiece at home,
how they must gleam.

In conference with Mr Pettiwood.
Having looked at the quarterly figures, he says
that someone will have to go.
It's Weems, a bit of a gambler, a bit of a tippler,
whose eyes stray from sales charts and balance sheets
to ankles and the racing form.

I watch Weems pack his things,
the framed photo of his wife.
Weems shakes each proffered hand,
I wish him luck and mean it.

The weekend,
a dutiful visit to father in Coventry.
The sitting room with a fox hunting print on the wall,

this sagging house he finally owns
after forty years at the foundry.
Some talk, some quiet, the sharing of a pie
and three bottles of ale.
I watch my father climb the stairs to the bedroom,
know the chair on which he'll drape his shirt and braces.

Sunday night, I catch the train back to Birmingham,
my attic room and downstairs landlady who tolerates
the jazz records I play.
Sidney Bechet and more Sidney Bechet,
trying to imagine New Orleans
as I polish my shoes
for Monday morning.

Arthur Marsden working on a sculpture of the writer Edgar Bowers

I'm working on his nose,
it's the nose of a hardened drinker.
Still, he's written his books. A dozen of them,
translated into twenty languages.

He's full of stories,
jail and madhouse stories,
times with the rich and famous
in villas in Spain and France.

It's his wife who's paying for the sculpture.
I'm a big fan of her paintings. Can't afford one myself.
She sure understands the natural world.
Her paintings of deserts and skies, they're unequalled,
make me glad that I'm not a painter.

I love stone, working it,
the sound of the hammer against the chisel,
chipping away, the form appearing.
I forget the clock, forget to eat.
I'm a pair of eyes, looking, absorbing, deciding.

Never wanted to be anything else.
At twelve, I was hauling up boulders from the beach
in Dad's wheelbarrow,

began sculpting seagulls and cormorants.
The garage workshop and the back garden were covered with them.
At fourteen, I did my first sculpture of a person, my Mum,
done from photographs and talking to Dad about her.

At the age of fifty,
all I know is that my heart is a boat,
its destination threatened
by foul inner weather lasting for days,
that leaves its captain unsure of his mind,
his face in the cabin mirror,
half purple, half yellow,
lacking a mouth.

But I wake on this studio floor,
remember that I have a loving wife,
others who believe in me
and I rise
knowing exactly
how my latest sculpture must proceed.

I take up my hammer and chisel,
sing an old Irish sea shanty
as the stone chips fly and fall.

Peter Bakowski

Sylvia Plath Writing In Her Journal, 23 Fitzroy Road, London, February 1963

7 a.m.

Beyond the bedpost

no mirage of glad husband

moving tall towards me with his English offer

of toast and marmalade,

a cup of tea.

He's with another.

She has mongrel blood,

a Knightsbridge accent,

can turn a man into

a spinning top,

an arsonist in the house of marriage.

One day she'll become

a book that my husband

has tired of reading.

I'll go soon, far from
Massachusetts, Devon, London,
the zoo where my selves are caged,
venomous snake,
sacrificial lamb,
sleepless monkey examining its fleas.

Outside snowflakes fall,
drafts of a poem torn to bits.

In the night sky
I see the Zoo-keeper.
From his starlit belt
important keys hang.

He moves towards me,
I towards him.

We'll embrace
where it's black.

Peter Bakowski

The Geometry At Parties

Sometimes you're cornered

by a square.

Peter Bakowski

The Making Of Fletcher

(for Lawrence Block)

Some close calls,
a few bullets removed by bent doctors
for the right amount of hush money,
but never dealt
that bad hand,
capture, sentence, jail.

Thirty-five unbroken years of being
a hired killer.

Looking into the shaving mirror,
Fletcher didn't see a monster,
only a bald, fifty-eight years old Caucasian man
of medium height
who lived alone,
didn't smoke,
could cook a variety
of pasta dishes.

There'd been women in his life
but each one,
whether feisty, exploratory or optimistic,
never reached below
his surface.

Fletcher's parents
died in a car accident
when he was three.

The next fifteen years
Fletcher was shunted back and forth
between reluctant relatives.
Home was something that belonged
to other people.

Eighteen when he hit New York City,
Fletcher looked older.

He hung round bars,
ran errands,
listened all the while,
slept under pool tables,
in all-night moviehouses,
one rainy night,
in a phone booth.
Mario, an older guy,
already with a nickel's worth of prison
up his sleeve,
taught Fletcher all about guns,
in an abandoned warehouse
full of
empty wine barrels
and rats' droppings.

One night,
walking back from their weekly target practise,
Mario said to Fletcher,
'It's tears that are expensive,
bullets and lives ain't.'

Six days later
Mario died,
victim of a hit and run
in a Coney Island backstreet at 4 a.m.,
far from his home turf,
far from his roominghouse,
its single bed,
Playboy calendar still showing Miss January

though now it was March.

Three years,
a thousand days and nights
plus some change.
Fletcher spent them
in gyms,
in bar-rooms paupered of sunlight,

where the sullen and bragging gathered,
got their elbows and racing forms beer wet,

or alone in the abandoned warehouse,
aiming steady at human outlines
that he'd chalked on the brick walls.

Fletcher felt himself ready to be in on
an armed robbery.

The bank was upstate,
the town should have been called Sleepyville
the lone guard was good
at trembling,
had retirement not heroics
foremost in his mind.
The getaway was smooth,
the cabin, back off the Interstate,
didn't draw any heat,
only the gossip of summer flies,
a curious deer.
Even with a three way split
there was ten grand each,
which went a long way in 1968.

Fletcher checked the impulse
to kill his partners,
then torch their corpses in the cabin.
Instead he watched them play poker,
heard their sandcastle plans
of doubling their money in Vegas
then hitting half the whorehouses
in New Orleans.

The end of the third week in the cabin,
they talked it out,
agreed that the bank job
was now a dead-end file.
They could move.

Fletcher let the two others have the car,
walked the fifteen miles
to the nearest Greyhound station.
The agent yawned
selling him the ticket.

Fletcher got out at Port Authority,
found a hotel room.

The next day
Fletcher walked the streets of Queens,
inspected a quiet front room,
stopped the landlady's volley of questions
by paying a year's rent in advance,
told her he was workin on
The Great American Novel.

At night
Fletcher trawled the bars,
bought drinks for the thirsty,
told certain players
that he was looking for solo work,
possessed a cool head,
a steady hand, a strong stomach
and during and after a job,
sealed lips.

One night in Ferguson's
Willie Seven came up to Fletcher's left ear
whispered, 'Lady, I'd like you to meet,
she's sitting over in the back booth,
nearest the kitchen door.'

Fletcher went over,
introduced himself,
sat down opposite the woman
who called herself Alice Long.

Pale skin,
probably Irish,
not quite forty,
Alice laid it out.

'I'm a broker,
I get calls from other brokers
who have clients.

These clients want the professional I hire

to rid their world
of a certain person.
Sometimes there's a time frame,
sometimes the death
needs to appear accidental,
sometimes the death
needs to make a real impression
in the press and on the street,
serve as a lesson to others.

The client's needs,
the status of the target,
the difficulty of the hit
all are factored into the price,
set or negotiated by me.'

Alice removed a large, thick envelope
from her shoulder bag.
'In the envelope,
_ there's a return airline ticket to Clearwater, Florida,
a black and white head and shoulders photo of the target,
their name and current residential address on the back
and ten thousand dollars in used hundreds,
another ten thousand to come once the client's satisfied.
The time frame is two weeks.

If you want the job
pick up the envelope,
contact Willie Seven when you get back,
he'll know how to reach me.'

Fletcher picked up the envelope,
walked out of Ferguson's,
hurried towards the subway,
first drops of October rain
hitting his broad shoulders.

Peter Bakowski

The Next Time You've Got Writer's Block

Go back to your childhood and adolescence,
whether meadow or minefield.

Consider

the distance you've come,
what you've discarded or continue to carry
and why.

Take a running scrawl at
what's in the room
or cornered in your heart.

Be alert to the world. Note
the veins of a leaf, the bank teller's fingernails,
what the people seated at the next café table
are saying to each other.

Remember that you've got a vocabulary.

So have dictionaries, billboards, headlines and traffic policemen.

Words are everywhere.

Let a few wander onto a black page.

See whether they react to each other.

If not audition some more.

Words are building blocks

which can be toppled, rearranged, reassembled.

Throw some over your shoulder,

see how they land.

Return to the circus arena

of being playful and precise,

balancing words on the tip of your nose

as you jump through flaming hoops

in rehearsal

for opening night in a new town,

far from where you've written before.

Peter Bakowski

The Weather Inside

Sometimes your thinking can make you cry,
sometimes your crying can make you think.

Peter Bakowski

The Word 'If' Is A Seesaw Waiting For You To Approach It

(for Marty Grothe)

If pigs could fly

there'd be

less bacon.

If you were a bully at school,

don't be one now.

If you keep having flings,

one day you'll be flung.

If you're digging your own grave,

consider what you're using

as the shovel.

If God exists

we must appal him sometimes.

If time is money

some of us

will end up short-changed.

If you think you know everything,

try writing poems.

Peter Bakowski

Times For Drinking Tea In China

When you've bargained well at the market

When you've cleared stones from a field

When sheltering from rain

When the horse you've tethered quietens

When resting by a riverbank

When a stream's fish resist your baited hook and shining lures

When envious of a neighbour's larger herd of goats.

When dreaming of leaving your village, never to return.

When the landlord visits

When remembering lean years, the selling of family heirlooms to buy food

When the midwife has left, her good work done

When a fox has been amongst your chickens

When a lost sheep is found, bleating in a ditch

When you've repaired your bicycle, brushed the dirt from your knees

When you're the only one awake in the dormitory

When far from home.

When thinking about what your parents taught you

When thinking about what you're had to learn for yourself

When you've paid off a debt

When trying to understand a relative

When you've paced the room for too long

When discussing the afterlife

When the fog lifts from the path you've taken

When your tea canister is almost empty.

(from Beneath Our Armour)

Peter Bakowski

To Progress

Chip away

at a wall

until it becomes

a stepping stone.

Peter Bakowski

War Zone

Here are the key words in this diminished world—

weapon,

target,

victor,

victim.

Take your next breath,

take your last breath.

Roll the dice over the edge of a cliff

into tomorrow's headlines.

The war turns children into orphans,

the war turns children into corpses,

the war turns children into statistics.

Children, it's not a good time to play outside.

Not everyone is listening,

not everyone is learning,

not every human is humane.

This is an angry poem.

Anger is a shovel blade

striking buried skull and rib,

slowly unearthing

another mass grave.

Peter Bakowski

Wealth

Having the time

to watch a snail

do a U-turn.

Peter Bakowski

When you channel surf

When you channel surf

take care that your mind

doesn't drown.

Peter Bakowski

Where Words Take Us

(for Adam Ford and Dennis Wild)

I write poetry—

because it puts windows where there were walls

because today is a mountain

I'd like to reduce to a few stanzas

because now is the time to write it.

I write poetry, hoping to astound myself.

I write poetry because I enjoy

coaxing words

out of the corral of my ribs,

letting them graze

upon the blank page

under the shade of an adverb.

I try to write poetry clearly, use words sparingly,
each word, a small cog or spring needed
to make the poem tick.

Don't want to fog or flood

any readers proceeding to the end of my poem,

where they may rest

in the quiet clearing

just beyond

the last full stop.

Peter Bakowski